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ABSTRACT

The author describes the development and current status of statewide efforts to establish formalized environmental education planning. To provide a "data base," an inventory of environmental education resources in the State was compiled and distributed. The compendium covered K-12 education, higher education, community groups, governmental agencies, the media, and businesses. Some of the conclusions drawn show: (1) Vermont chooses to remain independent from Federal/State control in the environmental education planning process but encourages extra-governmental coordination of its efforts; (2) the expenditure of large sums of money to compile listings of environmental programs is not necessary, but there is a real need for a communications system which permits the names and skills of readily available contact people; and (3) there is a strong sentiment against identifying environmental education as a separate subject in the K-12 curriculum. It is hoped that all learning could be environmentalized...that all people can see environment within the context of their daily lives. (Authors/EB)

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"The Politics of Environmental Education: Some Insights From Vermont"

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Environmentalists can be pleased with the recent achievements that Vermont has made in legislative and other governmental action related to the environment. They can look with justifiable pride at such notable developments as Act 250 (the state's comprehensive land use planning act), the Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act of 1968 (Title 24 Chapter 91), one of the first billboard removal acts, highway beautification, and legislation for beverage container recycling. Unfortunately, because of economic conditions related to the energy crisis (as well as a poor skiing winter), "regression" or "retreat" from our signal achievements looms today as a scary possibility. Such a condition prompts some Vermonters to believe that the legal path to environmental sanity and planning has gotten too far ahead of the public education effort. It is now time, they say, for the people to catch up with the laws and regulations that now exist. The recognition of how deficient Vermont has been in the environmental education of its citizens has led to a process for remedying this condition. This paper describes the development and current status of statewide efforts to establish formalized environmental education planning for Vermont. While some of this information may be "topical" and not broadly generalizable, we believe that there are some overlying principles about the environmental education planning process which can be identified by an examination of the experience of one small, New England state. We will conclude this paper with some generalizations.

In 1968, at about the time when Vermont awakened to the danger of intensive second home and recreation development, the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) issued a report calling for a number of definitive steps to be taken in the field of

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environmental education. This report was compiled by a small committee that included representatives from the State Department of Education and the Department of Forests and Parks. Their principal recommendation advocated an environmental center for the entire state. In 1970 the Vermont Environmental Center (VEC) was created in Green Mountain National Forest at an installation formerly used by the Job Corps at Ripton, Vermont. The VEC was funded by a grant from the New England Regional Commission and was staffed with science educators and naturalists. It provided on-site education experiences for small groups and emphasized teacher training on the assumption that such a focus would have maximum impact on student learning through the multiplier effect. It also provided speakers to schools and citizen groups upon request. For two years the VEC was looked to as the principal agent of environmental education in the state. The termination of the New England Regional Commission funding in 1972 forced the Center to close, leaving Vermont without a focal point for environmental education. The VEC had provided a quality program for a relatively small number of people, but it did not find a way to deliver its program to a sufficiently broad spectrum of Vermonters to encourage public support and permanent financing.

Vermont has had considerable difficulty in coordinating a state approach to environmental education. In the past, some of our problems have been: (1) The failure of any state agency to assume leadership in stimulating and developing environmental education in anything but the most piecemeal fashion; (2) A preoccupation with the Vermont Environmental Center during the two and a half years of its existence (June 1970-December 1972) and the belief that it would be able to respond to most of the state's environmental education needs; (3) Philosophical arguments between groups over the "best" orientation to environmental education to environmental education. (For example, the different perspectives taken by outdoor educators, environmental activists, science educators, alternative life-style proponents, and practicing natural resources managers); (4) Competition among private environmental organizations for credit in providing environmental education leadership; (5) A lack of interest displayed by commercial, professional, industrial, and labor groups.

The Environmental Education Act of 1970 which was passed at the very time that Vermont was becoming aware of the threats to its environment, stimulated great interest in environmental education among schools, universities, governmental agencies and private environmental groups. In addition to numerous individual applications for action projects, the Act prompted an application in 1972 from a consortium of Vermont groups for funds to establish a state plan for environmental education. The grant was subsequently received, and while it was less than anticipated by the proposal, it enabled the consortium under VNRC's direction to prepare an inventory of environmental education activities within the state, and to hold a conference which identified the kind of support practitioners would find most helpful and productive in the pursuit of their objectives. We will now go into some detail on the cooperative planning process which culminated in the charting of a direction Vermont environmental educators are now prepared to take.

In the fall of 1972 when planning began for the sequence of events which will now be described, many excellent environmental education programs existed in Vermont. Perhaps it was the Vermont tradition of independence, or maybe it was the rock rib of the Green Mountains which resulted in the diverse and invacuo activities. A systems person would have been horrified at the obvious lack of cohesiveness and coordination. In short, everyone was "doing their own thing." Communication among those practicing environmental education was sporadic, and,for the most part, lacking. It seemed clear to us that the close relationship between the environmental threat to Vermont and the need for public support of environmental protection made the development of a coordinated approach to environmental education an urgent matter.

In order to provide a "data base" for rational planning, an inventory of environmental education resources in the state was compiled and distributed in early May 1973. Prepared from mail questionnaire data, site visitations, and telephone follow-ups, this inventory was put in loose-leaf format to permit convenient update as additional and revised program descriptions could be obtained. The compendium covered K-12 education, higher education, community groups including environmental organizations, governmental

agencies, the media, and businesses. There are, to be sure, significant differences between a program (paper) description and a particular program in practice. The function of this effort, however, was not to be judgmental, but rather descriptive. We concluded that the inventory provided representative if not comprehensive information for the planning process which was to follow.

A steering committee of 12 representing K-12 education, higher education, private environmental groups, state and federal agencies, met during the spring of 1973 to plan what was to be a principal effort in the Vermont environmental education planning process, namely a conference at Woodstock on May 23, 1973. As a working conference for practicing environmental educators in the state, it was attended by 65 individuals representing private environmental organizations, elementary and high school teachers, college and university faculty and government officials. Its major thrust was to identify needs in environmental education in the state and develop a strategy for approaching environmental education in a more holistic, coordinated fashion. The principal conclusions reached were:

(1) A state plan for environmental education is necessary and desirable, but it should not be mandated by state government through enforceable standards. Such a plan should be flexible and should support, encourage, and respond to the efforts of local schools, community groups, and governmental agencies.

(2) Such a plan should encourage and respond to all environmental education activities, regardless of sponsorship. It should not focus only on K-12 programs.

(3) A state plan may include a statement of principles, standards or goals, and suggestions as to how they might be implemented. Such statements, if made, should emphasize positive encouragement.

(4) A state plan should provide for a clearinghouse activity. The clearinghouse should be perceived as a focus for the support and encouragement of environmental education throughout the state. It should not generate educational materials but would distribute them or be able to indicate where and how they could be obtained.

(5) The Vermont Natural Resources Council should assume a major role in the development of an environmental education plan for the state, including the creation of a resource service or clearinghouse.

Following the Woodstock Conference the Steering Committee sought to develop a way to implement the many suggestions which the representative group of environmental educators had made. The 6th Annual Governor's Conference on Natural Resources was held at Killington on October 25, 1973, and had "The Role of Environmental Education in the Future of Vermont" as its theme. The planning group for the Governor's Conference consciously built upon the previous Woodstock meeting. They tried to avoid "rehashing" earlier activity and hoped to open the dialogue on state environmental education planning to a larger audience. This meeting, with over 250 in attendance, came up with its own set of recommendations for environmental education in Vermont--recommendations which supported the conclusions reached at the earlier Woodstock meeting. At the Killington meeting, Governor Thomas Salmon stated that he would set up a broadly representative environmental education commission or task force to address the major issues raised at that all-day meeting. To date this has not been done.

Moving in what we hope is a positive direction, the State Department of Education has recently (February 1974) appointed a Science and Environmental Science Consultant to work with interested groups and individuals throughout the state in the formulation of K-12 guidelines for environmental education programs in our schools.

As indicated earlier, Vermonters generally feel that environmental education should be rooted at the local level with the assistance of a clearinghouse which disseminates information upon request. A mandated state curriculum received no support. Some of our difficulty in large-scale planning results from limited financial resources. We shall continue to seek efficient mechanisms for disseminating information about environmental education and will look for ways to avoid duplicative effort. The Steering Committee has asked VNRC to proceed with attempts to establish a clearinghouse service. It is worth emphasizing that of all the needs we have heard expressed, this

clearinghouse or resource service is the most frequently cited.

We are now trying to establish a clearinghouse which will provide all Vermonters interested in environmental education with a readily accessible source of information on environmental problems and methods of teaching and communicating about them. Specifically, this proposal would directly assist the public and governmental officials at local, regional and state levels to develop the understanding of and sensitivity to environmental problems that will enable them to deal realistically with the environmental control and land use regulation practices. These far-reaching regulatory statues can not endure without continuing public support which can be derived only from understanding environmental systems and man's relationship to them. The functions of the clearinghouse or resource service are conceptualized as follows:

(1) Coordinate the offering of workshops for the instruction of planning and zoning commission members, zoning administrators, teachers, contractors and others in the application of sound planning and conservation principles to their fields of professional interest.

(2) Organize and maintain lists of expert witnesses available to appear at hearings before district environmental commissions, the Environmental Board, regional and local planning commissions and other governmental boards charged with roles in the environmental control function.

(3) Initiate and maintain a Vermont environmental documents finder list which would indicate where environmental materials can be found for purposes of reference.

(4) Establish a literature distribution service modeled after that operated by the Massachusetts Audubon Society. This service would be limited to brochures and reprints dealing with ecology, conservation and environmental protection. This service would be supported by fees charged to cover printing and mailing costs.

(5) Establish a telephone answering service which would answer inquiries or refer them to sources that could respond.

(6) Assist in the evolution of state-wide guidelines for environmental education.

(7) Publish a newsletter.

(8) Keep the environmental education inventory up-to-date.

(9) Sponsor occasional conferences on environmental education.

(10) Prepare and distribute bibliographies on learning methods, study guides, and audio-visual materials.

(11) Actively seek examples of quality environmental education programs and disseminate information about them.

Conclusions

While our presentation up to this point has been largely factual and historical, we now share with you some conclusions we have drawn about environmental education in Vermont. As suggested earlier, we believe that much of what we have found has application in political units outside Vermont.

(1) Vermont chooses to remain independent from federal/state control in the environmental education planning process. Vermonters highly prize local initiative. Here, such a diverse number of programs exist that a centralized "game plan" which encouraged uniformity and demanded conformity would be strongly resisted. People have been dissappointed with the minimal support provided environmental education by the State Department of Education in the past, and now look to a private citizens groups, VNRC, for leadership. We believe Vermont to be unique among states in its decision to encourage extra-governmental coordination of the environmental education effort.

(2) A participatory planning process which engaged diverse individuals and groups throughout Vermont received almost universal praise. All groups could have a "piece of the action" in the process we have described, and further, this occurred without being demanded by any governmental agency.

(3) The expenditure of large sums of money to compile an exhaustive listing of environmental programs throughout the state is not necessary. A real need, however, exists for a communications system which permits the names and skills of contact people to be readily available.

(4) There is a strong sentiment against identifying environmental education as a separate subject in the K-12 curriculum. We hope to environmentalize all learning.

(5) We think it unwise for a state to look to a single group or individual for sole leadership in environmental education. As we described, the Vermont Environmental Center was at one time believed to be the answer to our environmental education problems, but we now realize that one such group can not possibly manage the immense task of environmental education. In one sense, VEC was the epitome of a single curricular approach--people were taken out of their classroom and placed into Green Mountain National Forest. Instead, we must help poople see environment within the context of their daily lives.

(6) A long-term environmental control program requires public support. The back-sliding of the 1974 Vermont Legislature on its prior praiseworthy environmental action clearly demonstrates the need for an educated citizenry if a democracy is to function. People must be informed and active politically. Our Land Capability and Development Plan was passed during a time when the Environmental Planning Information Center (EPIC) was active and conducting an educational effort. Now that EPIC is no longer in existence the Land Use Plan presently under consideration by the legislature is in serious danger of rejection.